



Chapter Two and a Half

Friday, October 2nd, 9:00 pm-ish

“Is it too much to ask for one damned decent handful of cards tonight?” Claire asked, tucking a lousy nine of clubs in amongst her other crappy-ass cards.

As usual, Ruby’s rec room was layered with cigar smoke floating high and plenty of bullshit to wade through below. With Ruby and Ronnie in the kitchen cleaning up after a late supper, Kate working at The Shaft, and Jess out behind the cash register batting her eyelashes at the beanpole college kid who was hanging around a little too late, Claire and Natalie were stuck with the three *amigos*.

And their cards and cigars.

“Quit your bitchin’ and bid,” Chester spoke around his cigar.

And their sweet dispositions.

Claire fanned her cards out in front of her. If Chester had been the one who had mixed and dealt the last hand, she would have suspected him of stacking the deck, but Gramps had played dealer this round. Not that Chester was usually a cheater, but being that his partner was all wrapped up in grimaces and winces thanks to a broken fibula, tonight’s Bid Euchre game felt more like time spent on a torture rack than fun. Claire was fortunate to have ended up with Natalie sitting across from her instead of Gramps. Her cousin’s quick grin and sharp wit made the game less painful.

“Fine.” Claire fingered the one face card she possessed, the Queen of spades. With the dark queen’s somber expression, she seemed like an omen tonight in light of Deborah’s imminent arrival at the R.V. park. If they were playing the game of Hearts, the spade queen would be the unlucky one—like Claire’s mom when it came to romance. If Old Maid were tonight’s game, she’d be designated the “old maid”—again, like Deborah.

“I’ll bid one,” Claire said.

Gramps grunted. “One is not a bid; it’s a pathetic attempt to hang out at the table with us. You’d save more pride if you just passed.”

“One,” she repeated with a jut of her chin and laid her cards on the table facedown.

Gramps’s glare swung to his partner. “What’s your bid, Thomas?”

“Three.”

“Four,” Natalie said without hesitation. Gramps had trained her well in the art of Euchre bidding. No matter what Natalie held in her hand, she always bid four. Not that she always won four tricks. Matter of fact, she tended to lose more than she won, especially in tonight’s game. Claire wondered if it was her many losses that had her cousin frowning so often when she thought nobody was watching, or if it had something to do with whatever she’d left behind back home in South Dakota.

“Pass,” Gramps said, shifting in his seat.

“Do you want me to adjust the pillow again, my delicate *rosa*?” Manny asked in between chomping on pretzels. He sat over at Ruby’s walnut bar, waiting for his turn to switch out with one of the losers at the end of the game.

“Cram it, Carrera.” Gramps adjusted his cast on the footstool.

Chester pulled his cigar from his lips. “Natalie, are you going to throw down a card or just sit there high on your winning bid and smile down at the rest of us common folk?”

“Put that cork back in your mouth, Chester.” Natalie tossed the Jack of diamonds into the middle of the card table. “That’s trump, boys. Read it and weep.”

As the card play ensued, tension hovered in the air, the atmosphere growing more unstable by the hour. Claire tried to ignore it and keep her stomach from roiling as the dark clouds edged closer, but a cold front was shoving into the area and it went by the name of “Mother.”

“Shit storm’s a’comin’,” Claire said as Natalie raked in the cards she’d won. “You guys feel it?”

“It’s not an it, it’s a *her*.” Gramps sat up straighter, cringing as he adjusted his leg again. “If you’d kept quiet about my situation Florence Nightmare wouldn’t have felt the need to come down here and play Nurse Ratched with me for the next week.”

“You’re the one who fell, Humpty Dumpty.” Manny took Claire’s side, as usual. “You’re just lucky the King’s men were able to fix you this time.”

“That was Claire’s fault, too,” Chester reminded Manny.

“No, that was Henry’s fault,” Claire pointed at the rotten beagle sprawled out next to Gramps’s foot stool.

Henry looked up at her, growling low through a wrinkled upper lip.

“At least she’ll be here only for a week,” Manny said.

Chester tossed a low spade card on the pile, following the Ace of spades lead card. “Who died and made you Polly Positive, Carrera?”

“With Claire and her sisters here,” Gramps said, “anything more than seven days in their mother’s presence will require an exorcism to bring back the blue skies and sunshine.”

“On behalf of me and my sisters,” Claire added her Queen of spades to the mix, “you can bite me.”

After Gramps played along with another spade, Natalie pulled in her third trick. “One more to go,” she said, shooting a quick smile at Claire. “When was the last time the three of you girls spent any length of time under the same roof as your mom?”

“After Ronnie came back from college, I think,” Claire said.

Gramps chuckled. “That was one hell of a disaster.”

“Kate started it,” Claire took a swig of beer, eyeing Natalie’s King of clubs sitting in the middle of the table. “I just put an end to it before it got out of hand.”

“What did Kate do?” Manny asked, ambling up to peer over Claire’s shoulder.

“So, in your opinion,” Gramps looked at Claire, “getting arrested for assaulting a police officer wasn’t already ‘out of hand?’”

“He was an *undercover* police officer, remember?” Claire tossed the nine of clubs on top of Chester’s ten card with the same suit.

“He still nailed you with an assault charge,” Chester said, his cigar punctuating the right side of his grin.

“That assault charge was bogus.” Claire poked Gramps’s shoulder. “Thanks for blabbing about it to your buddy here. I swear, you three boys can’t keep a secret to save your soul.”

“What did Kate do?” Manny repeated.

“The undercover officer was soliciting Kate for some lip service, so to speak,” Natalie explained. “He tried to nail her with some prostitution charge.”

“You can’t hit a cop,” Gramps said, rubbing his shoulder. “How many times do I have to tell you that, child?” He stole the trick from Natalie with his Ace of clubs.

“It was a loaf of French bread for Pete’s sake. It’s not like I clobbered him; I just crumbed his shirt really good.”

“Prostitution?” Manny asked.

Natalie watched Gramps scoop up the cards. “They were on their way home from a Halloween party and had stopped off at the grocery store. Kate was waiting for Ronnie and Claire outside on the curb dressed like a dominatrix.”

Manny snorted. “Kate ‘the porn star’ Morgan at her finest. I wonder if she still has that getup?”

“We should ask Butch the next time we pay our respects at The Shaft,” Chester said. “Make him take off his shirt so we can check for whip lash scars.”

“Knock off the talk about my granddaughter’s sex life.”

“Leather and whips would explain the moony expression Butch wears whenever Kate walks by.” Manny ignored Gramps. “I wouldn’t mind being tied to a bed and lashed once or twice.”

“It’s overrated,” Chester rolled his cigar in the ashtray, grimacing. “Not to mention the raised brows and awkward silence that comes when you have to visit the doctor afterward because of a rash you got from using generic ointment to heal the lash burns.”

Claire wrinkled her nose at Chester. “Is there anything you haven’t tried with a woman?”

“Don’t answer that question,” Natalie said. “I’m not drunk enough to forget the answer after I sober up.”

“How long were you in jail that time, *bonita?*” Manny asked Claire.

“I was out by daybreak. Ronnie worked her magic at the cop shop, charming the officer into dropping the charges before there was any permanent damage to my record.”

“She’s so slick,” Natalie said. “I guess those crazy etiquette classes paid off.”

Gramps led the next trick with the King of hearts. “You know, Claire, that assault charge is probably still on your record.”

Claire snorted and waved him off. “That’s minor compared to some of the other stuff on there.”

His forehead crinkled up. “What other stuff is on there?”

“Hey, Claire,” Jess pushed through the velvet curtain, saving Claire’s bacon from broiling under the heat of Gramps’s glare. “Your mom called. She wants you to get her favorite coffee and a few other things before she gets here tomorrow.” She handed Claire a list.

Claire scanned it, reading under her breath. *Bottled water, lactose free milk, high SPF sunscreen (the expensive stuff), hormone free chicken, kale, grass-fed beef, tofu, rutabagas, and some white zinfandel.*

“Sheesh,” she dropped the paper on the table. “This makes it sound like she’s coming for a lot longer than a week.”

“Yeah.” Jess blew a bubble and popped it in Claire’s ear, surrounding them both with the smell of grape gum. “She said something about finding someone to watch her house for a month.”

“No!” Chester’s cigar fell out of his mouth and bounced onto the card table.

“Aunt Deborah’s moving in,” Natalie chuckled, trumping Gramps’s King.

“Damn it.” Gramps squeezed the bridge of his nose, his whole face now pinched with pain. “It’s like a goddamned family reunion.”

“Cool!” Jess said. “I’ve never been to a family reunion. It’s only ever been Mom, Mac, and me.”

“Shucks,” Natalie said. “If only I could stay longer and enjoy all of the fun family excitement that’s sure to come.”

Claire stuck her tongue out at Natalie. “Watch it, mouth, or we’ll stuff her in your pickup and make you haul her all the way back home.”

“I bet Deborah would make a great dominatrix,” Manny said, twirling the end of his moustache. “I’d let her tie me to a bed.”

“Knock it off, Carrera,” Gramps said, “or I’m going to tie you to a bed and shove you over the edge of one of the Copper Snake’s open pits.” He tapped the two cards in the middle of the table, frowning across at Chester. “You going to play a card sometime tonight, lil’ fella?”

Chester picked up his cigar and jammed it back between his lips. “Kiss my ass, Ford.” He followed his words with a ten of hearts.

“What’s a dominatrix?” Jess asked.

“What are you going to do, Claire?” Gramps turned on her.

“I’m going to smile while my partner kicks your butt,” she said, tossing out the nine of hearts.

“He means about your mother coming,” Chester said.

“Oh, that.” She waited as Natalie and Chester both threw down their cards, following suit with another waste of a card. “I’ll avoid her as much as possible. Besides, she’s Ronnie and Kate’s problem as far as I’m concerned. Those three can go shopping together while I work on the restroom.”

“You really think you can keep a safe distance from your mom for a whole month?” Natalie asked, her skepticism evident in her tone.

Probably not. Claire shrugged. “Sure.” Especially after she returned to Tucson with Mac and left Ronnie behind to deal with the she-devil.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Manny asked.

“Another night in jail,” Gramps said, tossing another losing card on the pile.

Natalie piled her winning trick on top of the other four. “That’s not the worst.” She threw out her last card, the Ace of diamonds.

“Says you,” Claire tossed out her last card the same time as Chester, both unable to do better than the Ace. “You haven’t smelled the mattresses in Sheriff Harrison’s jail cells.”

“What’s worse than jail?” Chester asked.

Natalie smirked at Gramps’s last card, the King of spades. “Aunt Deborah finding a reason to stay down here ... for good.”

